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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how three principals were able to transform their schools into communities of professional learners. It focuses on how the principals demonstrated their own learning and how they nurtured learning in their staffs. It offers a brief profile of each principal and how she incorporated continuous learning into her life. All the principals used similar strategies to achieve increased staff capacity. They developed collegial staff relationships, focused on student success and continuous learning, and viewed teachers as decision makers and implementers. They also nurtured new ways of operating their schools and demonstrated the meaning of a professional learning community by constantly sharing their own learning with their staffs and by orchestrating opportunities for their staffs to incorporate the same practices. Accordingly, staff members responded individually and as a whole to take on those practices and the principals were able to tap the teacher's new-found expertise. Some of the themes that were evident in each school were the following: look for ways to improve learning conditions for students, trust colleagues, ask other teachers for advice, take responsibility for the operation of the school, and value teamwork. (RJM)

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Issues . . . about Change

Principals and Teachers: Continuous Learners

We have been studying Professional Learning Communities (Hord, 1997), the settings where teachers and principals collaborate to continuously increase their effectiveness through their own ongoing learning. We have significantly increased our understanding of what these schools look like and how they operate.

We have come to know these schools by what the staff is doing. At one school, we watched a committee of teachers planning for staff development for the whole staff. They were not simply putting together a wish list; they had researched student needs and interests and needs of the teaching staff, resources that matched these interests, and were applying numbers from the budget they had been given by their principal. In another school, the new math program in the school came from several teachers who attended a workshop and brought the ideas back to the faculty as a whole.

In these Professional Learning Communities (PLC) schools, the teachers and administrators are actively involved in gathering information, making decisions, and implementing those decisions. They are active in their own learning and are open to new ideas. When they have examined the options and determined the best course of action, they take measured risks in the implementation of their decisions. They display their commitment to their schools and students by their enthusiasm for their profession and their concern for students. The occasional evening meeting without additional pay is not unusual for these teachers.

We are finding clear evidence that one of the keys to the existence of these PLCs is the administrator. So we have been asking: How do these principals operate in their role as principal to develop settings where all professional staff members take responsibility for the highest quality learning possible at the school? While we cannot yet generalize broadly about who is likely to use a leadership role in this way, we can say something about the approaches in the five schools we have studied. In one school, the principal took advantage of a crisis to mobilize the staff and engage them in collegial problem solving so that they explored and learned about solutions for the problems. In a second school, the principal seized an opportunity to develop a learning community among her staff in order to study the possibilities and advantages of implementing a new curriculum that was being offered to the school. In the remaining three schools, the principals were continuous learners and they transferred their continuous learning practices to their staffs to create a community of professional learners. How these three principals expressed their own learning and the nurturing of learning in their staffs is the focus of this paper.

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Three Principals Who Are Continuous Learners

During our study of the three principals' schools, we gathered information about the principals' practices as leaders and consequently, as continuous learners. Each of these principals devoted attention to her own development and was quite visible to her staff as a learner. She made sure not only that the staff knew of her efforts to keep herself informed but that they experienced her application of that learning. The teachers in these principals' schools verified that their principals were constantly learning. One teacher said, "Professional staff development is definitely one of the strengths of our principal. She reads incessantly. She goes to workshops. She knows incredible people all over the country. She just has resources at her fingertips that I think a lot of people don't have. And so she brings in a lot of people and she has changed the school to a more school-wide focus" (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1998).

One of our researchers told a revealing story of her first visit to Barbara McNamara's[1] school where Barbara had been serving for seven years. She was waiting for Barbara in her office and noticed a current and well used copy of *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis* with lots of yellow sticky notes and dog-eared pages. Barbara seemed to be not only reading it, but studying it and using it as a reference. The teachers at her school associated her with constant reading and attending conferences, as depicted in comments such as "Anytime we go to her with an idea she knows what we are talking about. She has read about it or heard about it or worked with it"(Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1998). Within three years of beginning to teach, Barbara earned a Master of Education in Administration. After ten years of teaching, she took a two-year break to pursue a Ph. D. During that time she worked as a graduate research assistant in her state's university system. While a graduate research assistant, she was invited to participate in the development of her state's new teacher appraisal system. Later she participated in leadership training with SEDL's Leadership For Change and took a one-semester sabbatical from being principal to again focus on her Ph.D. studies.

Linda Aiken was also viewed by her staff as someone who does extensive reading and attending workshops for purposes of her own learning. A typical example offered by one of her teachers was, "I think we've got a principal that's always willing to learn new things. She is always sharing ideas with us of what she's learned. She herself is going to workshops and things like that. She's a member of several councils. She's involved in the PTA whereas before the administrators were never involved in that kind of stuff that goes on in the school" (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1998). Linda had a reputation for being extremely effective in networking for her own professional development and in turn to access resources for her school. In addition to her 14 years of teaching at the elementary level and seven years as a principal, her professional experience included membership on various district level committees, supervision of elementary student teachers, and numerous workshop presentations. She had a long list of trainings and workshops in which she had participated as part of her commitment to her professional growth.

[1]Pseudonyms are used for the principals discussed in this paper.

Patricia Sommers used her constant learning and application of what she had learned when the school district decided to reorganize a junior high school into a middle school. She spent seven years as principal of that middle school and developed the staff as a professional learning community. One staff member said, "The middle school concept was there. And she's sharp and she knew what was out there. She knew what was cutting-edge"(Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1998). She served in six professional positions during her 25 years in education: teacher, assistant principal, principal, counselor, supervisor of secondary instruction, and supervisor of middle level education. While principal, she worked with the Middle Grades School State Policy Initiative sponsored by Carnegie Foundation. She maintained a network of colleagues across her state and involved herself both in learning from these people and with them. She continued to conduct professional development workshops on leadership, school improvement, and schoolbased management in addition to participating in the design of certification programs to meet the new middle level education professional standards for her state.

Each of these principals, who were continuous learners, had been recognized by others for her leadership. University, district, and state leaders would call on these women for participation on committees and task forces and completion of other projects in their area before, during and after their success in PLC development. Their experiences in these arenas appeared to have contributed to the PLC work. Each woman remained active in such endeavors. Linda actively served on several committees. Barbara continued to teach graduate courses. Patricia conducted leadership training throughout her state. Each made good use of the contacts beyond her immediate professional circle.

These principals were each proactive about their own professional development and regularly put themselves into settings where they would have opportunities for learning. We characterized them as always scanning the horizon for new information that would improve learning and student success at their schools. They would then apply that new information at their schools, overtly modeling the learning and its application. In so doing, each principal left her imprint on her staff. Essentially, each woman turned her own ongoing learning into capacity building among the staff of her respective school and each staff used its increased skills to improve learning conditions for students at the schools.

Strategies Used by Principals to Develop Professional Learning Communities

These three principals used similar strategies to achieve increased staff capacity. Their teachers responded by engaging in and initiating activities that reflected the practices of those same strategies. These strategies are concerned with collegial staff relationships, a focus on student success, continuous learning, teachers as decision makers and implementors, and new ways of operating.

Developing Collegial Relationships with Staff

The staff members in these schools had the benefit of close professional interactions with their principals as co-professionals rather than simply filling

the traditional roles of supervisor and subordinate. Barbara, Patricia, and Linda invested the time and energy necessary for teachers to understand that collegial relationships between principals and teachers are possible and productive. Patricia's philosophy was to always work on both the task side and the people side of any staff undertaking. Barbara constantly shared journal articles and other sources of information with her staff members, treating them just as she would her graduate school classmates.

These principals were able to serve along side of teachers without "pulling rank" in order for their individual views to prevail in a group. They worked elbow-to-elbow with their teachers to identify and meet the needs of their students. At times they would put aside their own preferences in agreeing with the larger group's consensus for action. Each teacher had stories of his or her principal's efforts to interact personally with each teacher to learn more about the individual's philosophy, concerns and interests regarding teaching and learning. The teachers in Patricia's and Linda's schools understood that their principal would be supportive and help them correct any mistakes they might make which led to the belief the principal trusted and respected them as professionals.

Focusing Staff on Student Success

Within their schools, the principals led their teachers to work with a common purpose. At Linda's school, every member of the staff identified the vision for students and the school, and they were clear on their roles in working to make that vision a reality. Barbara's school had become so successful with their focus on students that real estate agents in the community could rent or sell properties near the school based on its reputation for student achievement. The teachers in all three schools followed their principal's lead and displayed values that concerned students and student success. For example, Patricia's teachers often mentioned "the first filter" which was: "If it's good for kids, it's possible. If it's not good for kids, we don't need to do it"(Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1998). This served as something of a mantra when the staff undertook new issues and problem solving.

Making Opportunities for Teachers to Learn

The principals structured gatherings for group learning that involved the whole staff. While these took slightly different forms at each school, the intent was the same: involve the teachers in learning more and sharing that new knowledge with each other. Linda's teachers knew that she directed as much money as possible to staff development. Barbara set aside a half day each month for Faculty Study which was an all staff event.

The teachers at all three schools developed vibrant practices of group learning which included research, synthesis, and discussion of information on topics related to school operations and instruction. These practices were evident at staff meetings, study groups, and committee operations. The teachers at Patricia's school joked that if they walked into a room and saw multiple chart pads on easels, they automatically divided themselves to include both genders, all races and each grade level at each chart pad. Teachers

knew also that their participation in conferences and workshops off campus included responsibility for bringing back information to actively share with their colleagues. This sharing often included formally structured presentations to and discussions with the staff, as well as the informal information exchange between classes and in the teachers' lounge. The genuine enthusiasm for collective learning was palpable at these schools and the principals nurtured it by modeling their own learning and providing opportunities for all staff to learn.

Inviting Teachers into Decision Making and Implementation

The three principals shared decision making responsibilities with their staffs. In each case, she developed her own organizational structure to incorporate and support staff involvement in decisions for the school. These tended to be in the form of committees with specific charges for operation and/or instruction. It also included whole staff decision making about the goals for each school year. Linda had a two-tiered approach for including teachers. In this approach, the teachers participated in design teams that focused on a specific issue. The chair of each team then represented the team in the School Leadership Council where decisions were made to guide the development and implementation of the school's priorities. The staff at Patricia's school each spring term chose a theme for the following school year. That theme guided the staff teams that determined what the curriculum and instruction would be for the coming year. Barbara did not have a formally structured process, but her teachers believed that she consulted them about pertinent decisions such as schedules for and departmentalization of the school.

In order to make these strategies work, the principal sometimes agreed to accept a staff or committee decision that was different from what she would have chosen herself. These acts of trust were consistently rewarded with good results. Not only were those staff and committee decisions effective, the staff members involved in them were encouraged to invest further in their school. Thus, this strategy increased both the capacity and the commitment of staff for taking responsibility for their schools. A teacher in Linda's school summed it up for staff members at all three schools, "With this principal we have a voice in deciding what is best for students and how we can best meet their needs. It's really kind of exciting because you have more interaction. It's more meaningful" (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1998).

Nurturing New Ways of Operating

The principals made concerted efforts to create conditions that were optimal for teachers to adapt to new ways of working in the school. These efforts were along two lines: structures within the school, and relationships between people at the school. An example of changing the structure of the school was Linda's decision to move the Special Education Department from an isolated area of campus into the main building of the school. This increased the degree of interaction between Special Education teachers and all other teachers which led to other positive changes. Patricia also rearranged her school by placing same grade level classes in the same hallway to increase

teacher collegiality and support between classes and during breaks.

A powerful example of this strategy across all three schools was arranging for early release time to allow whole staff planning and meeting time. Each principal used her creativity in order to make the arrangements necessary to change the school schedules. Of equal importance is that each woman also prepared her teachers to make good use of the time they would be given for whole staff learning and planning.

The building of relationships was continuous and reinforced the other strategies. At each school, the principal initiated relationship building by modeling with all teachers individually what it meant to trust, support, and encourage others. As teachers then supplied support for each other, they became more concerned with finding strategies that worked than with fearing failure. One teacher explained, "The principal strongly encourages the teachers to identify and try new things that they feel might be beneficial to students. When she does this, the teachers feel no threat of failing for the principal gives them full support under any conditions" (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1998). Staff relationships were also nurtured through the communication methods that included formal systems such as newsletters and daily announcements in written and verbal forms as well as fostering informal networks such as lunchroom sharing. As the PLCs developed, staff increasingly took responsibility for strengthening their relationships.

Teachers Respond to Principals' Model

The teachers at these schools increasingly emulated the examples set by the principals. The principals demonstrated the meaning of professional learning community by constantly sharing their own learning with their staffs and by orchestrating opportunities for their staffs to incorporate the same practices. The staff members responded individually and as a whole to take on those practices. These principals valued the expertise that their teachers possessed and were able to tap it. The result was a staff that responded as professionals and willingly expanded their understanding of personal responsibility as teachers. In the process, the teachers came to value the PLC itself as they increased their effectiveness and tapped into their creativity.

We recognized the teachers' valuing of the PLC by the practices which they initiated on their own. These practices were reflected in specific themes that surfaced repeatedly as we studied the schools. Those themes included the following:

Looking for Ways to Improve Learning Conditions for Students

Just like their principals, these teachers were constantly learning about their profession. Some were reading. Some were attending workshops and conferences. All assumed that whatever they learned, they were responsible to bring it back to their colleagues at their schools.

Trusting Colleagues

The importance of relationships was clear in these schools. These teachers willingly put energy into their relationships with each other including the time to know about each other's personal lives. This was not invasive, nor gossipy, but had a sense of genuine caring about each other. That caring about each other translated to

trusting each other professionally, which was critical to being able to work together as a whole staff. Individuals expressed confidence that actions taken and decisions made by committees would be in the best interest of the school as a whole, even when the individual was not part of that action or decision.

Asking Other Teachers for Advice

Teachers at these schools recognized other teachers for their expertise and actively sought counsel regarding particular students and classroom management as well as instruction. They readily exchanged information with each other and encouraged each other in their professional practice.

Taking Responsibility for the Operation of the School

As principals involved teachers in decision making the teachers increasingly identified decision making with their own professional duties. They came to expect to participate on committees and in study groups and understood that this work would lead to increased effectiveness of the school.

Valuing Team Work

Teachers could see that creativity and effectiveness were increased when they worked in groups. Although most of them found working in a group or team a little awkward or uncomfortable in the beginning, they came to prefer it once they had learned how to use the team approach effectively.

An interesting note is that these teachers did not show signs of "hiding behind the practices". In other words, they did not relinquish their individual styles nor did they use the practices to decrease personal responsibility. In fact, the reverse appeared to be true. They were affirmed in their individuality and the contribution that they made to the overall creativity of the group. They also expressed a willingness to work harder when they saw their colleagues actively pursuing a common goal. This is akin to the homeowner who relandscapes her front yard to express her own aesthetic sense while remaining true to the expectations of the neighborhood where she has chosen to live. These teachers feel free to use their personal styles while their choices for instruction and participation in school operations reflect the identity that the whole school has chosen for itself.

Concluding Thoughts

In her work on effective leadership and school change and improvement, Hord (1997) points out that "as an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement." (p.1) The principal must be willing to establish a context that nurtures the development of a PLC. Fortunately, some of the principals who have created this context have begun to write about their understanding of it. When Brian Riedlinger, an elementary school principal decided to develop a professional learning community among his staff, he soon realized that he would have to model the practices he wanted from his teachers. "Although I sensed my final objective, getting to that objective would be my struggle. I suspected that intensive staff development would be the driving force, but

my question became, 'what would *I* need to do to change *myself* that would lead teachers in the same direction I was moving?' " (Riedlinger, 1998, p.5).

Another successful elementary school principal, Flo Hill writes with two university colleagues:

> "No longer are school administrators expected to be merely managers of routines, but must prepare to take initiative. In collaborative school climates, the principal must understand change as well as manage it. Openness to diversity, conflict, reflection and mistakes becomes a necessity. In the facilitative role of fostering collaboration and collegiality, the principal must motivate staff to be dynamically interactive, professionally effective and mission oriented. Thus, knowledge of professional and organizational development and strong interpersonal and communication skills are critical components." (Hill, Lofton and Chauvin, 1995 pp.1-2).

In order to address these increasingly complex responsibilities, some principals have created communities of staff learners. These principals use their leadership role to demonstrate and encourage continuous learning for themselves and all staff members in order to increase the effectiveness of their schools.

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